

Learning from Fellows

// **The Art Design Media Subject Centre's Teaching Fellowship Scheme is now in its third year and forms part of ADM-HEA's aim to support the professional development and recognition of staff in HE and to ensure that their teaching is valued and rewarded. A particular focus of this award is studio-based teaching staff who have previously been under-represented in institutional and/or national award schemes. The financial aspect of the award is intended for personal and/or professional development in teaching and learning.**

The Scheme's strength is that it recognises the diversity of the staff who support student learning in art, design and media subjects and how crucial individual teachers are in the support and enhancement of the student learning experience. This year saw the highest number of teaching staff from art, design and media disciplines achieve National Teaching Fellowship status with four awards made in 2010. Attainment of this award should provide encouragement to other staff in the ADM sector, knowing that their work with students is being recognised and rewarded.

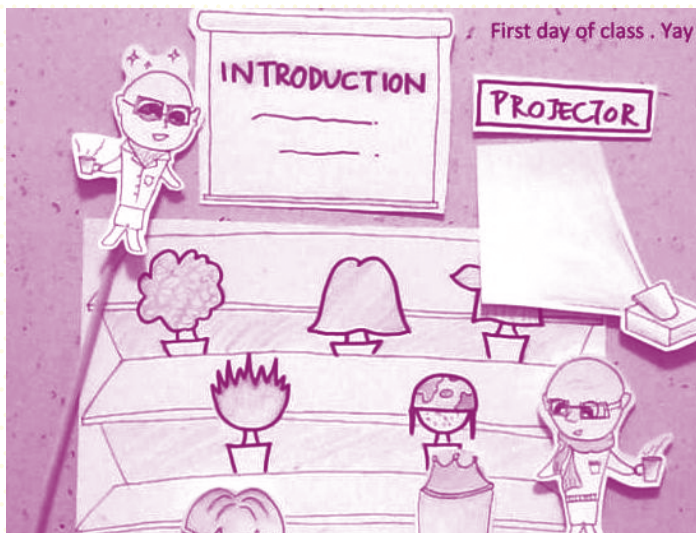
The reports in this section are from Fellows who were awarded Art Design Media Teaching Fellowships in 2010 and recently completed their projects. These are followed by a description of the work and research undertaken by one of this year's National Teaching Fellows, Kevin Petrie, who is based at the University of Sunderland.

A Creative approach to peer mentoring: utilising experienced students' self-reflection to support new learners

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// **There were three key initiators behind this project. These were to investigate the issues and concerns of new students, aid final year self-reflection and the articulation of students' personal learning strategies and, finally, to facilitate a method for students to peer inform and mentor. The project introduced a student created handbook aimed at harnessing the knowledge, learning skills and reflection already well developed in our third year Spatial Design students and to make their wealth of experience available to inform and support new design students during the pre-induction and freshers' period through a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). This article will therefore consider what the benefits might be for both first and final year students and how the product of this project might support new students to become more effective learners at an earlier stage in their academic careers.**

Embarking on a new course and moving away from home can, for many students, be a very stressful, angst-ridden and life-changing moment. David Cannon defined the character of the 'surprised newcomer' (in Peelo, M. & Wareham, P. 2003, p.80) as the new student embarking on a university course but feeling self critical and worried they will not fit in or match up. Additionally, Peelo (1994, p.37) has identified issues of students' lack of knowledge of what the university experience will be like, suggesting 'students' prior expectations of undergraduate courses can cast long shadows and the first terms can bring frustration and disappointment as well



Images: Richard Sober



as excitement and new experiences'. Pickford & Brown similarly highlighted how the widening participation agenda had meant that:

...students from non-traditional academic backgrounds are likely to find their confidence level is further undermined if their belief in their own abilities to succeed is undermined by conceptions about themselves which have made it difficult for them to achieve in the past' (2006, p.20).

Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has also outlined the aspiration to widen participation and highlight the need to consider how to support this:

We aim to make learning opportunities more accessible and attractive to people least likely to participate in HE, particularly by supporting initiatives that encourage more flexible, innovative, and student-centred provision.'

(HEFCE, 2008, www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/priorities/strands.htm)

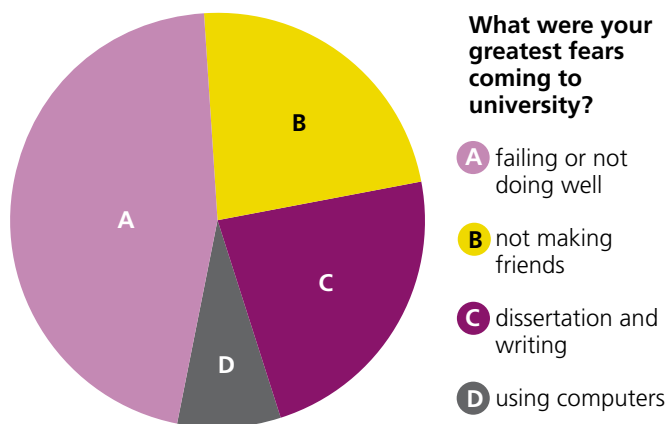
Therefore, to discover the key issues facing new starters, questionnaires and focus groups were carried out with spatial design students at Teesside University during Freshers' week and this largely confirmed the ideas highlighted in the literature and three key fears were apparent: the unexpected, wondering how they 'measure up' and various confidence-related issues. The focus groups often highlighted even more deep-seated fears, for example one new student who had replied 'nothing' on the

questionnaire when asked about their fears and worries, clarified this in person as 'nothing...well probably just the workload and getting through the reading list and mainly worrying about completing my first year to a level I am satisfied with ...and I know that I have the potential to do really well but whether I lack creativity in my ideas is another story and I am worried about not enjoying the course as much as I thought and being able to get along with people on my course.' Yorke and Longdon suggested:

There seems to be scope in institutions for improving the ways in which they support students' learning and hence reducing the risk of academic failure (2004, p.39).

So, to increase support and alleviate some of the highlighted fears the experienced learners used their creative skills as part of a final year Personal Development Planning (PDP) module to produce electronic alternative student handbooks. These were designed to be positive and supportive documents that, instead of replicating academic course handbooks, would come from a student perspective. And they were encouraged to develop strong creative concepts and given the freedom that these could be funny, inspiring and irreverent.

The project was initially tutor-led with exercises to help the students consider their personal learning strategies and develop their self-reflection and mentoring skills. However, most of the production process was very student-centred, albeit with >>



formative tutor input and some technical support, and the students worked in teams over a period of fifteen weeks to produce handbooks for the following year's new intake. These handbooks could be in the form of a website, Blackboard pages, Powerpoint or any format that can be made available electronically through the Blackboard VLE site.

Therefore, there are four key aims:

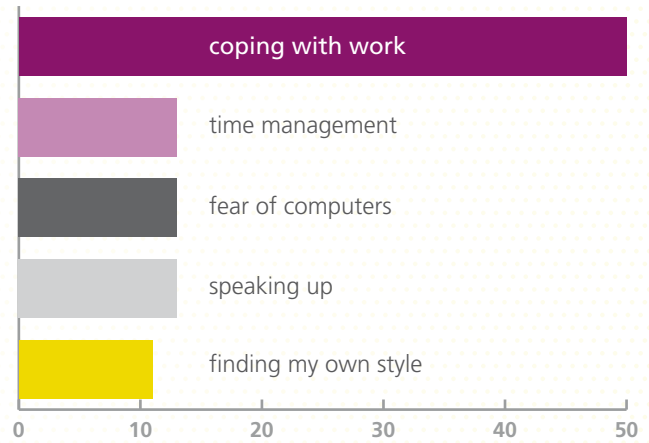
1. To harness the knowledge of experienced learners and provide opportunities to disseminate this to new students
2. To make learner self-reflection more applied and purposeful and enhance their understanding of the process
3. To facilitate a form of group mentoring between different course levels and student cohorts
4. To use the student voice and design students' creative skills to develop and disseminate pre-induction and new learner guides in a format that will appeal and be accessible to other design students.

The outcome from this project was ultimately the VLE site for new learners, but the final year students clearly benefit in a variety of ways. Reflection can be a troublesome concept if it is not made clear and purposeful and it can often be a very private and internal process. Therefore, unless students have a need to articulate and discuss it with others they are often left with a feeling of 'are we doing it right'? Consequently, this project, being situated in a final year PDP module, means the third years benefit from applying this group and personal reflection to the handbook creation.

By becoming reflective practitioners the students can consider their own progression and successful learning strategies and disseminate this knowledge to the new learners. There is a strong element of peer support and mentoring embedded in this work and it has been suggested by Morton-Cooper & Palmer (2000) that mentoring can not only aid coping with new experiences but also fast-track development and this group mentoring can also prevent the negative voice of the 'toxic mentor' (Darling, 1986). Design students benefit from having a studio base with interaction between cohorts and levels and the third years are encouraged to consult with the years below them to investigate common topics and issues to cover. These can be as diverse as where to seek help with personal problems, coping strategies and making friends, or academic matters for example, getting the most out of feedback. Therefore, they could pass on learning strategies that have aided their own academic progress, or they could simply be sharing information about where to purchase course supplies. A wiki area on the VLE site additionally allows all three years to communicate with one another.

The student perspective means the guides are friendly and accessible and new learners benefit from the peer-to-peer student-centred information and advice, which tends to be less formal, prescribed and regulation-based than if written by academic staff. All the students involved benefit from increasing their familiarity with electronic virtual learning environments, working together in teams, offering and receiving peer mentoring and support and ultimately helping to create a more cohesive learning community. This sense of identity and recognition across all three years in the studio environment

What will be your greatest challenge?

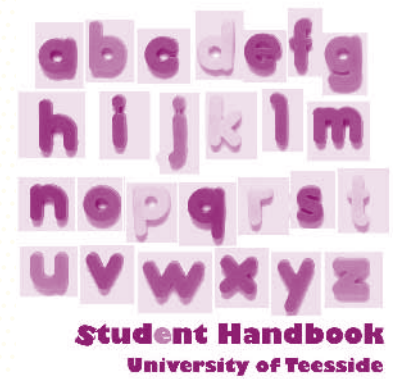


additionally enhances the students' relationships with each other and further aids retention strategies.

The experiences acquired by final year learners direct the newer learners in terms of pointing them towards what they should aim for themselves, through learning from the successes and mistakes of others, and this might speed up the acquisition of their own learning strategies. Therefore, before they even receive any assignment feedback they already have indicators and feed forward advice to refer to. The process of considering what new learners need in the handbooks is equally worthwhile for the third years who can then develop their own reflective skills by considering their own progression and learning successes.

The final handbooks tend to follow a number of common themes. For example in terms of work the ideas comprise: learning strategies, time and project management, understanding and following assessment criteria, the effective use of feedback and how to use tutors and what you can expect from them. When considering the social and personal the handbooks tend to encompass where to live, coping with loneliness and personal problems, the social scene, low cost recipes, shopping and financial advice, balancing work and play and making the most of the whole student experience. The visual is essential to engage design students so the concepts and presentation are important and students have employed diverse formats from puppet show films to spoof tabloid newspapers and A-Z handbooks (examples can be seen at <http://sam-intranet.tees.ac.uk/spatialhandbook/campus.html>).

In previous years students have produced simple pdf, Powerpoint or printed handbooks but the ADM-HEA funding has been invaluable in enabling a more ambitious approach with additional time for the reflection and mentoring processes and a significantly wider scope by funding replacement staff time and additional technical expertise used to transform the student work into a cohesive electronic working site. The website is now much more widely accessible and was made available a month before new students began their courses and was evaluated during the second week of term to discover if it had enhanced these students' experience. Some initial findings have identified that 75% of the new students felt the site had made them feel more relaxed about coming to university and 66% were more relaxed about starting their course. Receiving information from their future peers rather than from academics was considered 'easier to relate to' with some claiming 'I trust their opinions more' or 'they know what you are going through'. When questioned about more specific areas of concern, 92% found the advice about coping as students to be either valuable or very valuable, and 76% found the advice on learning how to learn valuable, 16% said very valuable. There were no negatives, but some requests for additional information that can be built into future iterations of the site. In addition to the advantages expressed by new students, there were additional positives for the students who created the handbooks as well as for the course itself. The process of creating the electronic handbooks proved beneficial to the final year students by assisting the reflective process through its application towards a physical outcome. It is also clear that it has helped forge links between course levels, fostering a community culture and could therefore aid National Student Survey performance >>



What makes an ideal design student?

Images: R.Sober

and retention rates. Finally, although these handbooks are very visual in character and employ creative concepts that obviously appeal to other creative students, the broader model could be adapted for other subject areas to instead demonstrate their own bespoke strengths.

The ADM-HEA Fellowship

This project has not just benefited students at Teesside, but has also provided numerous professional development opportunities including dissemination through presented papers including the HEA Annual conferences in 2009 and 2010 and ADM-HEA Subject Centre seminars. The principles of this research have also become widely known, leading to many further opportunities and contact from others in this discipline. The Fellowship brings with it a valuable network of advice and support from the ADM-HEA itself and also from fellow Fellows, all of whom have demonstrated a deep-rooted commitment to student learning and support. In terms of personal impact I was awarded a further Teaching Fellowship by my own institution, in no small part as a result of the ADM-HEA award.

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